

## The Life of Plato

Olympiodorus, teaching at the Platonic school in Alexandria in the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century CE, begins his lectures on Plato's *First Alcibiades* with a short narrative biography of Plato himself. Since the *Alcibiades* was the first Platonic dialogue that students in the Alexandrian academy would study, this biographical account marked the transition between the students' preliminary study of logic, in Aristotle's works, to the inspired teaching of Plato.

Broadly speaking, we might consider two complementary interpretive frames, through which to examine the overall structure and purpose of this biography. The first is proposed by Michael Griffin, in the introduction to his translation. Prof. Griffin helpfully suggests that we read the biography as providing a model or paradigm for the soul's journey through the successive stages or grades of virtue (or excellence, *aretē*).

For a relatively compact overview of this account of virtues,<sup>1</sup> we can turn to Damascius' *Commentary on the Phaedo* (I,138–142, translated by Thomas Taylor):

The first of the virtues are the **physical**, which are common to brutes, being mingled with the temperaments, and for the most part contrary to each other; or rather pertaining to the animal. Or it may be said that they are illuminations from reason, when not impeded by a certain bad temperament: or that they are the result of energies in a former life. Of these Plato speaks in the *Politicus* and the *Laws*.

The **ethical** virtues, which are above these, are ingenerated by custom and a certain right opinion, and are the virtues of children when well educated. These virtues also are to be found in some brute animals. They likewise transcend the temperaments, and on this account are not contrary to each other. These virtues Plato delivers in the *Laws*. They pertain however at the same time both to reason and the irrational nature.

In the third rank above these are the **political** virtues, which pertain to reason alone; for they are scientific. But they are the virtues of reason adorning the irrational part as its instrument; through prudence adorning the gnostic, through fortitude the irascible, and through temperance the desiderative power; but adorning all the parts of the irrational nature through justice. And of these virtues Plato speaks much in the *Republic*. These virtues, too, follow each other.

Above these are the **cathartic** virtues, which pertain to reason alone, withdrawing from other things to itself, throwing aside the instruments of sense as vain, repressing also the energies through these instruments, and liberating the soul from the bonds of generation. Plato particularly delivers to us these virtues in [the *Phaedo*].

Prior to these, however, are the **theoretic** virtues, which pertain to the soul, introducing itself to natures superior to itself, not only gnostically, as some one may be induced to think from the name, but also orectically [i.e., pertaining to desire]: for it hastens to become, as it were, intellect instead of soul; and intellect, as we have before observed, possesses both desire and knowledge. These virtues are

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1 For additional, quite helpful discussion of this "ladder of virtues" and its relation to the *Alcibiades*, see Michael Griffin's introductions to both volumes 1 and 2 of his translation of Olympiodorus, cited in the next note.

the converse of the political: for, as the latter energize about things subordinate according to reason, so the former about things more excellent according to intellect. These virtues Plato delivers in the *Theaetetus*.

And continuing on, in the translation of Westerink (I,143–144; slightly modified):

**Paradigmatic** virtues are those of the soul when it no longer contemplates the intellect (for contemplation involves separateness), but has already reached the stage of being by participation the intellect that is the paradigm of all things; therefore these virtues too are called ‘paradigmatic,’ inasmuch as virtues belong primarily to intellect itself. This category is added by Iamblichus in his treatise *On Virtues*.

Lastly, there are the **hieratic** virtues, which belong to the Godlike part of the soul; they correspond to all the categories mentioned above, with the difference that while the others are existential, these are unitary. This kind, too, has been outlined by Iamblichus, and discussed more explicitly by the school of Proclus.

It’s quite likely that such an approach was in the mind of Olympiodorus when he delivered the lectures, especially given the place of the *First Alcibiades* itself as the turning point in his students’ education, and in the education of Alcibiades himself (by Socrates, in the dialogue): both Alcibiades and Olympiodorus’ auditors are being invited to make the move from merely ethical or habitual (and thus, pre-philosophical) virtues to the political or civic virtues which are properly philosophical.

We might also inquire — as we did with the *Seventh Letter* earlier this year — how Plato’s life illuminates, or is illuminated by, the account of the philosopher’s ascent from, and return to, the cave in the seventh book of the *Republic*, and indeed, by the entire narrative structure of the *Republic*, beginning as it does with Socrates’ descent to the harbour for the festival of Bendis (“I went down...”), and ending with the sweeping vision of the Myth of Er.

With all of this in mind, we might ask ourselves: What does Plato’s life teach us, about what it might mean — in Olympiodorus’ day, and in our own — to live a philosophic life? How can the practice of narrating Plato’s life (including his education and the catalogue of his teachers) help us to understand the Platonic tradition as a tradition; i.e., something “handed on” down through the generations? How might the story of Plato’s life serve as a model, a challenge, or an inspiration for our own lives — both in general, and as heirs (in whatever ways) to that tradition?

The translation here is that published by Michael Griffin in the Ancient Commentators on Aristotle series;<sup>2</sup> the biography proper (everything apart from the first two paragraphs given here) was also translated by Thomas Taylor to accompany his translation of the *Alcibiades* (in TTS volume IX).

Olympiodorus begins his lectures by inviting his students to move from the preliminary teachings of Aristotle, to the inspired works of Plato:

Aristotle begins his own *Theology*<sup>3</sup> with the statement that ‘all human beings naturally reach out for knowledge; and a sign of this is their love of the senses’.

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2 The complete translation of the entire commentary is now available under a Creative Commons CC-BY 4.0 license, from <https://www.olympiiodorus.net>. I have simplified Prof. Griffin’s translation for group reading, by removing many of the square brackets, most of the Greek terms given in parentheses, and the endnotes.

But in beginning Plato's philosophy, I would go a step further and say that all human beings reach out for Plato's philosophy, because all people wish to draw benefit from it; they are eager to be enchanted by its fountain, and to quench their thirst with Plato's inspirations.

There are four of these in Plato, in four of his dialogues. One, in the *Timaeus*, he delivers with inspiration after he has become divinely possessed, and portrays the Demiurge addressing the heavenly bodies, whom he calls the 'young gods', about the administration of affairs here on Earth. (That is also why Iamblichus entitled his commentary on this dialogue *On the Speech of Zeus*.) The second inspiration occurs in the *Republic*, where he became possessed by the Muses and portrayed them recounting in detail the dissolution of the constitution that he had constructed, when he says: 'everything that has come to be must necessarily pass away'. The third inspiration occurs in the *Phaedrus*, where Socrates was possessed by the nymphs as he philosophised under the plane tree about love. The fourth occurs in the *Theaetetus*, where he became philosophically inspired in his portrayal of the leader of the philosophical chorus, that is, the contemplative philosopher. It is, then, for the sake of these inspirations that everyone comes to the philosophy of Plato.

But come, let us also describe the parentage and life of the philosopher, not for the sake of 'much-learning', but rather to help and prepare those who approach him: for this is no 'Nobody', but rather the 'one who reverts human beings'. For the story goes that Plato was born the son of Ariston, son of Aristocles, from whom he traced his family to Solon the lawgiver (which is also why, in emulation of his ancestor, he wrote the *Laws* and the *Composition of the Republic*, in 12 and 10 books respectively): and he was born from his mother Perictione, who was descended from Neleus, son of Codrus. Now they say that a vision of Apollo coupled with his mother Perictione, and appeared to Ariston in the night, instructing him not to have intercourse with Perictione until she gave birth, and he acted accordingly. And when Plato was born, his parents took the newborn and placed him on Mount Hymettus, wishing to make sacrifices on his behalf to the gods there, Pan, the Nymphs, and Shepherd Apollo. And as he lay there, the bees approached and filled his mouth with honey from their honeycombs, so that the saying came true of him, 'from whose tongue flows speech sweeter than honey.'<sup>4</sup> And he also calls himself in every way 'the fellow-servant of the swans', since he came forth from Apollo; for the swan is Apollo's bird.

From these rather lofty beginnings, Olympiodorus proceeds to discuss the course of Plato's education and learning. The first, tripartite classification of Plato's studies points explicitly to the Platonic teaching on the tripartite soul, as discussed prominently in the *Republic*, the *Phaedrus*, and elsewhere.

When Plato reached the appropriate age, in order to pursue the usual course in reading and writing he initially studied under Dionysius the grammarian, whom he actually mentions in the *Lovers*, in order that his teacher Dionysius would not lack a share in the enduring memory attached to Plato. Then, after him, he availed

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3 That is, the work that is known today as the *Metaphysics*.

4 This is said of Nestor in the *Iliad*, I, line 249.

himself of a teacher of gymnastics, Ariston of Argos, by whom he was reportedly given the name 'Plato' (he was previously called Aristocles after his grandfather). He was given this name because of two parts of his body that were particularly 'broad' (*platus*), his chest and his brow, as the images of him set up everywhere tell us, since this is how they appear. But others say that he was not renamed for that reason, but rather on account of the 'breadth,' the flow, and the open expanse of his unconstrained style, just as they say that Theophrastus was renamed on account of the divine (*theios*) quality of his expression (*phrasis*), having been called Tyrtamon before. And Plato had as his music teacher Draco, the pupil of Damon, whom he mentions in the *Republic*.

Athenian youths were taught these three subjects – I mean reading and writing, music, and wrestling – not just for the subjects' own sake, but in the case of reading and writing to structure the reason (*logos*) within them; in the case of music, to master their spirited emotion; and in the case of wrestling and gymnastics, to rekindle their appetite when it waned. (Alcibiades was evidently taught these three subjects as well, which is why Socrates says to him, 'but you refused to learn the pipe', and so on.)

After this, Olympiodorus follows Plato on various other studies which do not (at least so obviously) follow that basic tripartite pattern, but which all contribute to Plato's writing and teaching in some way. It may be worth noting that while Socrates appears, in some sense, as the climax of this series of teachers, he is not the last of them.

And he also studied under painters, from whom he had help in the mixing of colours, and he refers to these in the *Timaeus*. After this he was taught by the tragic poets, who were called 'the teachers of Greece'; he went to these for the gnomic and solemn qualities to be found in tragedy and for the heroic nature of its subjects. And he participated in the dithyrambs that were performed in honour of Dionysus (who is called the 'overseer of becoming'). For the dithyramb was dedicated to Dionysus, from whom it also took its name: Dionysus was the 'Dithyramb' because he came forth from two portals (*thurai*), from Semele and from the thigh of Zeus. As a matter of fact, the ancients were accustomed to call effects by the names of their causes, just as they also call wine 'Dionysus'. That is why Proclus says on this subject, 'All that they prophesied to the parents, I beheld in the children.' That Plato had also practised the dithyramb is clear from the *Phaedrus*, a dialogue that abounds in dithyrambic style, when we consider that this was reportedly the first dialogue that Plato wrote.

He especially enjoyed both the comic poet Aristophanes and Sophron, from whom he had some help in the representation of the characters of his dialogues. He reportedly enjoyed them so much that when he died, the works of Aristophanes and Sophron were even found on his couch. And he personally composed the following epigram for Aristophanes: 'The Graces, when they sought to take up a sacred space that would never fall, found the soul of Aristophanes.' And he put Aristophanes in a comic situation in the *Symposium*, reflecting the fact that he had help from him in comedy: for when he made him sing a hymn to Love, he portrayed him falling into hiccoughs in the middle, so that he was unable to complete the hymn.

And he composed tragic and dithyrambic poems, as well as some others. He burned them all after he had experienced the lifestyle of Socrates, with words like these: ‘Hephaestus, come forth as thou art: Plato now has need of you.’ And a certain Anatolius, a grammarian, once won considerable success here in Alexandria by quoting this line to Hephaestus, who had been appointed governor of the city, giving it the following form: ‘Hephaestus, come forth as thou art: Pharos now has need of you.’

They say that when Socrates was about to receive Plato, he dreamed that a wingless swan was seated on his knees, and straightaway it grew wings and flew up into the air, and let out a sweet-voiced cry, so as to enchant everyone who heard it: and this showed the future glory of the man.

After the death of Socrates, Plato resorted next to Cratylus the Heraclitean as his teacher, for whom he also composed a dialogue of the same name, entitling it *Cratylus*, or *On the Correctness of Names*. After his time with this man, he went to Italy. Upon finding there a school that had been established by the Pythagoreans, he had Archytas the Pythagorean as his next teacher: and his dialogue the *Philebus* is reportedly also named after a certain Pythagorean, and he also refers to Archytas in that dialogue.

Next, we’re treated to an account of Plato’s journeys abroad, some of which will be familiar to those who were part of our study of the *Seventh Letter* a few months ago. Here, we find both the “political” journeys to Syracuse, for the purpose of educating the tyrants there, and the more “hieratic” journeys to be initiated by the priests of Egypt and Persia:

And since the philosopher should be a ‘sight-lover’ of the works of nature, he also went to Sicily, in order to behold the craters of the fire in Mount Aetna – it was not for the sake of the ‘Sicilian table’, O noble Aristides, as you claim. And in Syracuse he visited Dionysius the Great, who was the tyrant of that city, and he attempted to transform his tyranny into an aristocracy; in fact, that is the reason why he went to him. And when Dionysius asked him, ‘Whom among human beings do you regard as happy?’ (since he thought that the philosopher would refer to him out of flattery), Plato answered ‘Socrates’. And he asked him again: ‘What do you consider to be the work of the statesman?’; and he answered, ‘To make his citizens better’. And he added a third question: ‘What then? Do you suppose it is trivial to dispense justice correctly?’ (For Dionysius had a reputation for dispensing justice correctly.) But Plato answered, not shrinking back in the least: ‘A small thing, yes, and the least part of the statesman’s work: for those who hand down the right verdicts are like menders, who repair torn clothes’. And he added a fourth question: ‘Do you not consider the tyrant courageous?’ ‘He is the most cowardly of all,’ Plato replied; ‘for he fears losing his life even to his barber’s shears.’ And so Dionysius, enraged by these answers, proclaimed to Plato that he must escape Syracuse before sunset. And that was the ignominious fashion in which Plato was ejected from Syracuse.

The cause of his second journey to Sicily was that, after the death of Dionysius the Great, his son Dionysius succeeded to the tyranny, and his uncle on his mother’s side was Dion, who had become Plato’s associate on his first journey. So Dion wrote to him, ‘if you join us now, there is hope of transforming the tyranny into an

aristocracy'. Then, after Plato had undertaken his second journey for this reason, he was accused to Dionysius by his bodyguards of plotting to transfer rule to Dion and depose Dionysius, and then arrested by Dionysius and handed over to Pollis of Aegina, who was on a trading voyage to Sicily, for sale as a slave. And he, after bringing Plato to Aegina, found Anniceris the Libyan, who was about to sail to Elis in order to compete in the four-horse chariot race. So when Anniceris chanced upon Pollis there, he purchased Plato from him, winning greater glory in this act than any victory in a chariot race could bring. Aristides also remarks about this episode that no one would have heard of Anniceris, had he not ransomed Plato.

The reason for his third trip to Sicily was that Dion had been arrested by Dionysius, deprived of his property, and cast into prison. He therefore wrote to Plato that Dionysius had promised to release him, if Plato came back to him. He readily undertook this third journey as well to help his friend. And that covers the philosopher's time abroad in Sicily.

One should be aware that he also journeyed to Egypt, to the priests there, and learned the priestly skill from them. And this is why in the *Gorgias* he says, 'No, by the Dog, God of the Egyptians': for the power that the sacred images have among the Greeks, animals have among the Egyptians, by representing each of the Gods to whom they are dedicated.

Since he wished to encounter the Magi as well, but was unable to reach them because of the war being joined in Persia at that juncture, he arrived in Phoenicia, and upon encountering the local Magi, acquired the skill of the Magi. And this is why in the *Timaeus* he is plainly experienced in the skill of sacrifice, discussing the prognostic signs of the liver and entrails and other matters like this. But these events should have been recounted before explaining his second and third voyages to Sicily.

We might reflect on what difference it would make, to the account of Plato's life and/or the pattern it offers, if we were to follow Olympiodorus' note about the chronology, and place Plato's studies of the hieratic arts *before* his later forays into Syracusan politics.

Olympiodorus then continues with the account of the foundation of the Academy, and a conclusion to Plato's life that is as divinely-touched as his birth:

When he reached Athens he established a school in the Garden of Academus, marking off a certain portion of this gymnasium as a sanctuary for the Muses. And the misanthrope Timon would keep company only with Plato there. And Plato attracted very many to learning, both men and women, preparing the latter to attend his lectures looking like men and demonstrating that his love of wisdom was superior to any love of work. For he dissociated himself from Socratic irony, from frequenting the Agora and the workshops and from pursuing the young to engage them in conversation: and he also dissociated himself from the solemn dignity of the Pythagoreans — keeping the doors closed, and 'Himself said so' — by conducting himself more sociably towards everyone.

Now when he had made many into his lovers and had benefited large numbers of them, he dreamed as he was on the point of death that, having turned into a swan, he was moving from tree to tree, and in this way was causing extreme toil for the

hunters. Simmias the Socratic interpreted this dream as follows: that Plato would be difficult to grasp for those succeeding him who wished to explain him: for the commentators who attempt to pursue the concepts of the ancients are like bird-catchers, and Plato is difficult to grasp since it is possible to interpret his words on the level of natural philosophy, ethics, or theology – in short, in many different senses – as is also the case with the words of Homer. For these two souls are said to have embraced every mode, which is why it is possible to take the words of both of them in all manner of ways.

When he died, the Athenians buried him lavishly, and inscribed upon his tomb: ‘Two did Apollo bring forth, Asclepius and Plato, The one to keep our soul healthy, the other our body.’ And that covers the parentage and life of the philosopher; next we must proceed to the subject before us.

The *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* relates that Plato died precisely at the age of 81, since this is the square of 9, the number of the Muses. A broad tradition in antiquity holds that this was “precise” indeed, with Plato dying on the very anniversary of his birth. The *Prolegomena* further adds that on this birth/death anniversary, the Athenians honored Plato with a hymn that began “On this day, the Gods gave Plato to mankind..”